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ABSTRACT

Despite predictions that handwriting would become obsolete in the age of technology, it is still considered an important skill today. Examples are cited of individuals who improved their understanding of themselves and of particular concepts after writing about their thoughts and feelings. Frequently, dyslexic students are denied access to this avenue of expression because they have difficulty recalling letter shapes and trouble transcribing them on paper. The Children's Handwriting Evaluation Scale (CHES), developed at Texas Scottish Rite Hospital's Child Development Division, measures the rate and quality of cursive handwriting from elementary through college levels. The Children's Handwriting Improvement Program, developed at the same hospital, uses visual-auditory-kinesthetic methods to help students gain handwriting fluency. The correlation between CHES scores and academic achievement, intelligence tests, and visual-motor skills is analyzed. Teachers, tutors, and parents are urged to work with dyslexic children on their handwriting skills for 5 minutes a day. (Author/JDD)

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Revisiting an "R" - News and Views of Writing

by

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Abstract

Despite predictions that handwriting would become obsolete in the age of technology, today it is considered an important skill. Methods of teaching which employ the visual-auditory-kinesthetic pathways are described. The dyslexic or dysgraphic student is urged to practice five minutes daily. The most difficult letters to reproduce are detailed, and recent research reviewed.

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Revisiting an "R"- News and Views of Writing

Research on handwriting reveals a plethora of information and a few anecdotes. One of interest concerns the pithiest letter ever penned. It was written by Victor Hugo to his publisher inquiring about the sales of "Les Miserables." Hugo wrote, "?". The publisher responded, "!".

Futurists have predicted the demise of handwriting for over twenty-five years. Technology in the form of computers, word processors, and the ilk, they said,would make pen and pencil obsolete. Not only have their visions not materialized, but today an interest in and recognition of the importance of handwriting have resurged.

Educators, therapists, and prominent people have commented on the value of kinesthetic effort and its relationship to thinking and feeling. In the recent movie that Shirley McLaine made for television, based on her book Out on a Limb, there was a scene in which she was emotionally devastated and said, "I went back to the hotel and wrote and wrote and wrote so that I could understand."

An SMU psychology professor (Smith 1987) found that students who wrote about their feelings compared to those who wrote about trivia showed improvement in the immune functions of their blood and had fewer visits to health care professionals for six weeks after the experiment. One of the astronauts, J.D. Van Ahlen,

remarked, "I am never as clear about a matter as when I have just finished writing about it. I often write memoranda to myself solely for the purpose of clearing my own thinking" (Quoted in Nelms 1987).

A prominent educator wrote, "regular, routine . . . writing does seem to help students not only to express themselves more clearly but actually to understand concepts more clearly. Children who are having difficulty with a concept or are feeling overwhelmed by a large amount of information can often work through their frustration on their own by writing" (Nelms 1987).

Dyslexic students need to discover and partake of this avenue of expression. Frequently, however, they are denied access to it and are particularly penalized because they have difficulty recalling letter shapes and trouble transcribing them on paper. Parents and teachers criticize, correct, and want to help but lack knowledge of remediation skills. As a consequence, the dyslexic child experiences pain and shrinks from putting anything on paper.

At Texas Scottish Rite Hospital the Child Development Division staff has been interested in handwriting for over twenty years. In 1982, Phelps, Stempel and Speck created a diagnostic test, the Children's Handwriting Evaluation Scale (CHES) to measure the rate and quality of cursive handwriting in grades 3 through 8. In 1985 Phelps and Stempel developed norms for college students (Phelps & Stempel 1985a), and this year published a test

for manuscript writing for grades one and two (Phelps & Stempel 1987a).

The determinants of quality of handwriting garnered from an extensive search of the literature are: letter forms, slant, space, rhythm, and general appearance. (For a more detailed discussion, see Annals of Dyslexia, 1987.) The CHES diagnostic tests, when scored, made clear which areas of the child's writing needed remediation and resulted in the development of the Children's Handwriting Improvement Program (Phelps & Stempel 1985b).

The corrective techniques employed to help the student gain fluency begin with showing the student a model of each letter shape, one at a time. The teacher points out the relationship between the reading or manuscript letter and the cursive writing letter, The formation of the letter is limned in terms of the specific approach, drop, and release strokes. These descriptions comprise a verbal chant which is used to accompany kinesthetic movements initially. An arrow drawn on both blackboard and paper establishes baseline and direction.

The large muscles are first called into play by having the student write the letter shape in the air with his writing arm while looking at a large model written by the instructor on the board. The student then writes his own letter on the board. Subsequently, he develops his small muscle control by writing on

wide-lined and progressively more narrow-lined paper. This method employs the visual-auditory-kinesthetic sensory pathways. Five minutes a day practice will enable virtually any student to develop acceptable handwriting.

This year we have done extensive research on writing with interesting results. We examined the handwriting scores for all the patients in grades 3 through 8 referred to the Child Development Division in 1986. These scores were correlated with academic achievement and intelligence test scores. The handwriting scores showed a low positive correlation across the board with all other scores. The most significant and consistent correlations, however, were found between the Coding subtest of the WISC-R and the handwriting rate and quality.

Scores on the Beery Test of Visual-Motor Integration were not significantly related to writing scores after the third grade level. We were surprised at this finding but hypothesize that while a certain amount of visual-motor skill is requisite to produce letter forms, after a modicum is achieved, it is not the dominant factor in developing the skill. An analogous research pointed out that copying skill was directly linked to mental maturity until age seven but not subsequently (Townsend 1951).

Children referred to the clinic doubled their writing rates between grades 4 and 8, just as did students in regular classes on whom the CHES was standardized. The only difference in the rates

was the lower base, and consequently, lower terminal rates for the children having school difficulties.

Through all our testing we have found that the most difficult letters to reproduce are a's, m's, and letters of the extenders (l, j, p, q, etc.). Since these letters are often illegible if seen out of context, they deserve particular attention in training. In our samples, from grades 1 through 8, approximately 20% of the spelling errors were due to illegible letter forms.

When we studied manuscript writing, we compared the penmanship of children taught in the conventional manner with those taught the D'Nealian method. Statistical analysis indicated that both groups wrote with equal quality but that the traditional manuscript group wrote more rapidly.

Since we know how to help dyslexic, dysgraphic, and learning disabled children with their handwriting, we urge all teachers, tutors, and parents to make an effort to work with the children five minutes a day. The children (and the teachers) will be rewarded by augmented abilities to learn concepts, think clearly, and express emotions. All society will benefit.

We agree with an anonymous quotation used as an exercise by a calligraphy class: "writing is a kind of speaking with graphical signs. It creates composure, honesty, and even humor - it's fun."

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Joanne Phelps, psychometrician, and Lynn Stempel, educational diagnostician, have been associated with Texas Scottish Rite Hospital's Child Development Division for 22 years and 20 years respectively. They have worked extensively in assessment and evaluation of children suspected of having dyslexia or learning disabilities. Mrs. Phelps is a certified graphoanalyst. Mrs. Stempel is a dyslexia therapist.